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The role of the councillor and the work of meeting

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biographical note

Richard Freeman is Professor of Social Science and Public Policy at the University of Edinburgh. His most recent books are, with Steve Sturdy, Knowledge in Policy: embodied, inscribed, enacted (Policy Press 2014), with Jan-Peter Voß, Knowing Governance: the epistemic construction of political order (Palgrave Macmillan 2015) and, with Fiona McHardy and Danny Murphy, *Working for Equality: policies, politics, people* (Argyll Publishing/CCWB 2017).

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The role of the councillor and the work of meeting

abstract

This paper picks up a theme from the recent literature on the councillor, that of time spent in meeting, and suggests that if we are to understand the role of the councillor we must understand the work the meeting does. The discussion is based in a series of empirical studies, and uses interactionist precepts to identify and explore the dynamics of the informal encounter, the more formal meeting and its associated paperwork, and the special if ambiguous function of meetings about meetings. It draws on recent institutionalist theorising to describe how the routines and processes of meeting must be inhabited and enacted in practice, positioning them in Arendt's sense of politics as action and interaction. In concluding, it considers how future research might explore the ways that meetings are separated from the world to which they refer, and how different meetings and kinds of meeting are articulated one with another.

keywords: councillor; role; institution; encounter; meeting; document

wordcount: 8164

the role of the councillor

The local councillor, like other elected representatives, mediates between state and society. In the simplest account of the local political system, economic and social interaction of various kinds generates claims and conflicts as to who should get what, when, how. Societal needs, interests and demands are aggregated and articulated by intermediary organizations, among which political parties have a distinctive, specialist function. Information is assimilated, conflicts settled or deferred, resources raised, and budgets allocated by an institution specifically designed to do so, the local council. This makes for three worlds, or more precisely three kinds of world of local politics, those of the constituency or community, of the party and of the council. The specialist task of the the councillor is a precisely general one, to mediate between these worlds: to listen to constituents, to argue with other representatives, to decide in council.

In the late 1960s, Hugh Heclo interviewed 29 of the 31 new members who joined Manchester City Council in 1964-66, asking about how their time was spent in the 'everyday work of local government' (Heclo 1969). He described 'three faces' of council work, already capturing something essential about the hybrid, multidimensional, fetching-and-carrying, in-between function of the councillor subject to the demands of party, council and constituency: 'The city councillor is in fact not one but three men: committee member, constituency representative, and party activist' (Heclo 1969, p 187). In this way, the councillor serves as bridge and buffer between worlds and the organizations of which they are composed (APSE 2016, 2017).

Around the same time, by the later 1960s and 1970s, the century-long emergence and consolidation of local government in Britain began to give way to widespread questioning of its function and operation (Lepine and Sullivan 2010), both in public discussion and in academic research. Redcliffe-Maud's *Royal Commission on Local Government in England* (1966-69) was principally concerned with

its territorial organisation, while a research literature came to focus more specifically on the role of the councillor. With Heinz Eulau and colleagues' (1959) distinction between 'delegate', 'trustee' and 'politico' serving as point of departure (Copus 2010), typologies of the councillor's role have continued to be revised and refined.[1] Lewis Corina (1974), for example, was principally interested in the ways in which the work of the councillor articulated with party politics ('Party Politician; Ideologist; Partyist; Associate; and Politico-Administrator'), while more recent studies have attended similarly to relations with citizens, with council officers[2] and a concern for place ('Steward; Advocate; Buffer, Sensemaker; Catalyst; Entrepreneur; Orchestrator') (Mangan et al 2016). In different ways, each speaks to a tension between managerialisation and democratisation, between the requirement for a greater professional-technical understanding among councillors and at the same time for a more grounded, organic connection with their communities. The multiplication and differentiation of possible roles for the councillor seems to speak to an increased weight and complexity of the demands placed upon him or her.

Academic interest has been paralleled in renewed public and political concern over the last decade or so: the *Councillors Commission* (2007) was concerned with incentives and barriers to recruitment, while the *Commission on the Future of Local Government* (2012) floated a concept of the 'civic entrepreneur'. In 2013, the House of Commons Select Committee on Communities and Local Government restated the key position of the councillor in the workings of the local state – *On the Frontline* – recommending enhanced support, skills development and the introduction of an element of performance management. 'Effective local democracy requires effective councillors', as their report put it (§1). The Local Government Research Unit's *Voice of the Councillor* (2017) shifted the focus further from roles to resources, calls for improved access for councillors to information, training and support. As what Barnett, Griggs and Howarth (2019) identify as a 'deficiency narrative'

[1] See, for example, Jones (1973), Corina (1974), Gyford (1976), Newton (1976), Rao (1998) and, for a useful summary, Copus (2010).
[2] See APSE (2014), Stocker and Thompson-Fawcett (2014).

has built, each contribution to it reinforces a sense that the councillor is somehow the problem: that the role endures, indeed remains indispensable, yet forever needs to be fixed.

What is this 'role' which has attracted such attention? In sociological terms, we might think of a role as a kind of institution: being a councillor, like being a carer or a teacher or a community leader, entails conforming to a consolidated set of social expectations, adhering to both formal and informal rules and regulations. A role offers its occupants a set of opportunities and a corollary set of constraints, and it can be fulfilled well or badly. Any such occupant might be subject to what is termed role conflict, when competing demands and expectations become difficult or impossible to reconcile. In this way, the role of councillor is that institution devised to mediate between other local political institutions. Like other social roles, it's necessarily underdetermined – it carries no job description, for example – in order to allow for a certain adaptability and interpretive flexibility. By the same token, councillors speak of how crucial the management of expectations is to their survival, if not their success.

Thinking in these terms of the role of the councillor allows for two kinds of response in institutionalist thinking: one normative, and one analytic. According to the first, the position of the councillor might be effective or not - and if not, the institutional problem that represents will have an institutional solution: in the introduction or adjustment of regulations for recruitment and training, for example, or by extending the scope of the institutional resources on which the councillor might draw. The second response might be led by new currents in neo-institutionalist thought. As the old institutionalism has evolved into the new, the significance of informal arrangements has become a principal focus of attention among its diverse strands (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). This is based in a shared appreciation that formal and explicit rules and laws are invariably embedded in social conventions, practices, and 'standard operating procedures'. Institutions must be enacted and inhabited to have effect; they are continually made and remade in

interaction such that we might best think of them as 'processes rather than things' (Lowndes and Roberts 2013, p 61). In policy studies, this is expressed in a body of work centred on practice, on what it is that policy makers actually do (Bevir and Rhodes 2010, Colebatch et al 2010, Freeman et al 2011, Wagenaar 2011). If institutions matter, they are made to matter in the mundane and everyday, in action and work as patterned forms of human behavior, in the 'doings and sayings' of human (and sometimes non-human) actors (Schatzki 2001, Latour 2005; Freeman 2019).

this study

This paper is derived from a series of small studies convened and supported by APSE Scotland. This began with a diary exercise used with a focus group of 6 councillors in September 2014, in which we set out simply to document and discuss their schedules for a single week. It was developed in a subsequent project, in which we asked 5 councillors to complete diary entries on six different days over a six-week period from mid-August to late September 2015. This gave us data sheets on each of 30 different councillor days. We recruited councillors from different parties and different parts of the country, and holding different offices or none at all. We chose dates falling on different days of the week, including one Sunday. The diary entries were structured into morning, afternoon and evening sessions, and a final section prompted informants to offer some overall reflection on the pattern and substance of their work as they thought relevant or appropriate. We then convened a small focus group of 4 councillors, to validate and elaborate our reading of the data: these discussions helped us turn specifics into generics, from notes and records of specific events to recognized and shared types of engagement. In turn, the themes derived from this work informed and were further explored in our next project, which consisted in a set of 18 interviews with councillors (8) officers (6) and engaged citizens (4), and which explored aspects of everyday political

activity, again based on participants' diaries. This part of the work is reported more fully in APSE (2017), while the current paper explores a particular phenomenon apparent in the diary entries across all three studies.

This phenomenon is that of meeting, and it is in itself unsurprising. From the beginning of our discussions, meetings were central to councillors' work: indeed, they were what that work in large part comprised. It's important to acknowledge here that the diary method brings with it the risk of an artefactual finding, which would be to treat as work only what is recorded as work. It may be that the diary invites recording of appointments rather than all the other kinds of activity which take place around and between them. That said, in our data the centrality of meetings seems incontrovertible: the claim here is not that councillors do no more than attend meetings, but that meetings are central to what councillors do.

This rehearses once more a standard theme in the literature on the role of the councillor. Heclo's 'faces' were interfaces, negotiated and traversed in meetings of different kinds: in committee meetings, in direct assistance and interaction with constituents, and in party meetings.[3] Two decades later, and sharing a similar general concern with role and function, the Audit Commission (1990) drew specific attention to the significance of committee work in the life of the councillor: 'however much time any individual councillor may put in, 60% of the average time - 45 hours - is accounted for by attending, preparing for and travelling to and from official meetings of the council and its committees and subcommittees. A further seven hours a month are spent in meetings of which the main purpose is to prepare for those formal meetings - party groups and consultation meetings with the public' (Audit Commission 1990, p 6).

[3] Wiseman's slightly earlier (1967) *Local Government at Work* begins with the council meeting and then looks at (meetings of) committees and party groups, though without problematizing the phenomenon or process of meeting as such.

Following the academic and policy-oriented literature as well our neo-institutionalist precepts and our own empirical investigations, then, we have established that councillors 'do meeting'. But what do meetings do? Why does meeting matter, and why does it play such a prominent part in the occupational role of the local councillor?

Addressing these questions meant returning to the data and treating it rather differently, in the way of a case study: as an occasion for theorizing, rather than as demonstration of a hypothesis. In doing so we recategorized it not in terms of actors and issues but of actions: what were our research participants doing when they were being councillors? That they were spending time in meetings now seemed to mean no more or less than that they were working at being councillors. They were engaged in different kinds of meeting, as well as in other related activities which in themselves weren't meetings, but which bore on their motivation and ability to participate meaningfully in meetings. The aim of this paper is to parse out the different elements of meeting and meeting-related activity, to indicate why they're significant and how they might fit together. The substantive claim is that the councillor is engaged not just in multiple worlds, but in different kinds of meeting, and that to understand the role of the councillor we need to understand the work these meetings do. Our data suggests that the councillor is uniquely positioned in different kinds of meeting in different kinds of world, and it is this that makes his/her role both possible and significant.

The presentation which follows distinguishes between the informal encounter, the more formal meeting and the special character of meetings essentially concerned with the substance and conduct of other meetings, taking account of each in turn. In addition, while councillors in our study talked predominantly of meetings, they also talked frequently of the paperwork that more formal kinds of meeting seemed to entail. This seemed important enough to warrant specific discussion, and indeed told us something of the work of meeting in its own right. Paperwork appears therefore as a supplementary category in the analysis below.

encounter

1200-1300 church garden opening... Combination of socialising on-duty and picking up casework from constituents who button-hole me... 1300–1600 vintage car spectacular.... Making way round two dozen retailers and other businesses for informal chats, along with chats of various lengths with constituents who recognise me [Councillor 5; 6 September]

Flower and Food Festival... I met and welcomed [tv celebrity chef]... We spent about half an hour chatting and I made the point of discussing with him all the positive regeneration work going on across the city in the hope that he would relay this to people when discussing his time in [city]… In terms of press I conducted a live interview on [local radio station] and met journalists from the local newspapers to discuss the festival. I also received regular updates from staff running the event in relation to logistics, eg minor parking and queuing issues. This was to enable me to pre-empt questions from the press [Councillor 4; 6 September]

Had an advice surgery before returning to the office to catch up on casework [Councillor 4; 11 September]

1945-2100 Home visit to constituent... The home visit was challenging, because of the context of the problem experienced by the constituent [Councillor 5; 2 September]

Visit officers in Depot for update conversations with each team lead. Regular but purposefully unscheduled visits [Councillor 5; 18 August]

Today's training session was particularly useful, and the opportunity to meet informally with staff from various directorates was good for increasing knowledge of employee perceptions of the authority [Councillor 5; 2 September]

1715-1845 Coffee with councillor colleague from neighbouring authority (adjoining ward) for catch-up, coordination and info sharing [Councillor 5; 29 August]

Councillors report many and various unplanned, informal encounters in the course of their working weeks, and they take place with members of their communities, and with party and professional colleagues. We understood from our discussions that they report them because they matter: an exchange with a constituent and a follow-up with an officer satisfy a sense of personal responsibility for making a difference to others' lives which is a key motivation for many in doing their job. Some such contacts might be scheduled in advance, such as a home visit, or semi-structured in the way of a consultation at an advice session or surgery; others will be impromptu and informal, such as an approach made at a community gathering.[4] 'The social public events are bread and butter to a local politician', as one of our participants explained: 'They are worthwhile and useful. They give people the opportunity to meet and often present issues informally'.

What constituents are doing in making an approach to their councillor is expressing claims, raising an issue or identifying a problem, suggesting what they might like to happen, and perhaps, in passing, justifying an entitlement to help or simply recognition. What's going on at the same time is more subtle and profound, in that all interaction entails a 'definition of the situation'. By this Goffman (1971) meant that participants must work out, in the course of their interaction, just what sort of encounter they are engaged in: they must gauge the worth and credibility of their councillor, assess his or her authority, understanding and capacity to respond, and establish some worth and credibility of their own. Participants to an encounter establish by guesswork and more than a little trust a reciprocal understanding of each other and what they're about. 'We live by inference', as W I

[4] That said, a feature of our discussions with councillors was their noting the eclipse of the conventional advice session or surgery by what we might describe as the 'electronic encounter': contacts made, referred and resolved by email, and events planned, announced and reported on social media.

Thomas said, which meant for Goffman that all interaction has 'a promissory character' (1971, p 14); we might add only that this seems especially true of encounters with politicians. As US political scientist Richard Fenno put it in his account of US congressmen in their constituencies, 'Goffman does not talk about politicians; but politicians know what Goffman is talking about' (Fenno 1977, p 898).

Some direct encounters are more complex and dynamic than others: in the second excerpt above, Councillor 4 has met an important visitor to his city, and is concerned that he (the visitor) should form a good impression of it. He looks to establish that in providing him with relevant information, and does the same in talking to the local media, and is supported in his endeavour by updates from staff helping him to establish and maintain a particular story. Communication between councillor and event staff goes on backstage, out of sight and earshot of visitors, in order that this performance might be sustained. The councillor's conduct towards his visitor constitutes a performance, not because he is being manipulative, but simply because it is behavior in the presence of another designed to have an effect on that other, to ensure that he forms an appropriate impression of what's going on.

It is a feature of many encounters that they go unnoticed by or remain wholly unknown to all but their immediate participants. The encounter is a cocoon, in which participants are exposed to each other, but largely protected from others around them. In a busy workplace, such encounters take place many times a day, and may often be simply social in character, when it’s for one person to say hello and the other to note a change in the weather. Some are more substantial and purposeful, our data shows, and entail exchanges of news and information. More protracted yet still significantly private conversation allows party colleagues to coordinate their day-to-day activities below the level of formal organization, for example, or to share reflections on their work and the challenges they confront, both separately and together. It is interesting, similarly, that for all the scheduled

meetings councillors have with officers and other staff, they should seek out opportunities for unscheduled interaction with them, in passing through the depot, for example, or in the margins of a training session. What is significant is that work done this way couldn't be done any other way, in that the knowledge generated and shared in such exchanges is of a kind that is unlikely ever to be written down, or to feature on the agenda of any more formal meeting.

The different encounters reported here remind us that the work of representation is not linear, but iterative and multilateral: the role of the councillor is to represent his or her community to the council, and sometimes to intercede on behalf of individuals; it is likewise to represent the council to the community and both council and community to audiences beyond. Doing any of this is predicated on the dynamics of the presentation of self and the politics that entails (Jenkins 2008).

meeting

Most councillors are elected as members of political parties, and as such take part in the meetings associated with party discussion and decision-making processes. Others stand independently, but may work with other independents, similarly.

> *I also spent some time in discussion with members of the independent group in relation to political aspects arising from a forthcoming by-election [Councillor 1; 20 August}*

> *I serve as a member of the policy forum of my party and as such I have to attend a number of key meetings throughout the year to progress the policy agenda within the party [Councillor 2; 29 August]*

> *1700 – 1915 [Party] Council Group meeting [Councillor 5; 11 September]*

Councillors spend some, and sometimes much, of their time in council meetings, of course. These might be full Council or Cabinet meetings, or meetings of subsidiary and component Committees and groups, or of external bodies and partnerships. Many meetings have a consultative and coordinating function, and include both councillors and council officers, many will be routine and/or scheduled some time in advance. One informant listed on one day, for example, a weekly meeting between the Leader and the Deputy Chief Executive and a fortnightly meeting of the Finance Group, and on another a fortnightly meeting of Convenors and Directors and a weekly meeting with the Head of Communications and Marketing.

> *I chaired a meeting of the administration group which comprises the chairs of the various committees within the... Council together with the senior management team [Councillor 1; 24 August]*

> *At 2pm I took the Chair of the Council's Workforce Culture Working Group which... comprises representatives of Council departments and the Trades Union and the meeting lasted for 1½ hours [Councillor 1; 2 September]*

> *10.00-12.30 Meeting of the Council Cabinet; 2.00-4.30 Audit and Scrutiny Committee [Councillor 2; 20 August]*

> *1000-1300 Enterprise & Environment Committee… 1100-1300 Tripartite Consultative Forum [Councillor 3; 20 August, 2 September]*

> *1000-1145 Council Cabinet... 1400–1530 Audit Committee [Councillor 5, 20 August]*

The relative formality of a meeting is expressed in the degree to which its timing and location are established and its purpose and participants specified, usually in writing and usually in advance.

More formal meetings will have explicit rules of procedure in which participants are accorded specific roles: they will usually consist in oral discussion of documents such as plans, papers and reports, and will themselves produce documented accounts of their having taken place.

Meetings can be categorised on two dimensions: whether their denominator is an issue or a set of actors, and whether participation is open or closed (Freeman 2008). A community meeting on road safety is open but issue specific; a working group meeting will involve only those appointed to it and will consider a single issue; a meeting of heads of service is closed but may be open to whatever issues its participants see fit to raise. Few meetings will be open to a range of participants without specifying a topic or purpose. Most meetings set limits on who is to be involved and what will be at stake.

The modern meeting is the result of a long process of evolution; its proliferation and elaboration of the meeting is coterminous with the development of the modern polity (van Vree 1999, 2011). 'The meetingization of society... refers to a long-term social process: as larger numbers of people become mutually dependent over larger areas and/or differences in power decrease between people, an increased number of problems needs to be solved through talking and decision-making in meetings which require an ever increasingly precise, more equal and more embracing regulation of impulses and short-lived affects' (van Vree 2011, p 241). 'Meetingization', for van Vree, is realized in processes of 'parliamentarization', which means an increased focus on organized and formalised talk as a means of containing and managing conflict, and 'professionalization', which means the increased capacity of individuals for skilled talk which is more discursive and collaborative than strict procedures allow (van Vree 2011). The meeting, that is to say, has become institutionalised over time: it is an occasion for interaction, but one which ensures that participants' behavior is bound by strong convention and sometimes by recourse to formal rule. Its continued utility, nevertheless,

depends on the practical skill of participants to work creatively and flexibly within the regulated framework it provides.

It is its planned and explicit ordering of verbal interaction between multiple participants which distinguishes the meeting from the encounter (though we should note that encounter, too, is bound by other kinds of social convention). Yet there is there much that is consistent with the processual as opposed to substantive reading of the encounter. Councillors' diaries sometimes note the issues with which their meetings are concerned, but also invariably refer to the identity and status of their participants. This is because meetings are defined by who was there as much as by what they address, which is to say that they enact the structure and organization of local government itself. The sociological and anthropological literature, similarly, reveals that meetings, as we might expect, are ostensibly concerned with sensemaking (Weick 1995), that is with taking account of the world beyond themselves, identifying challenges to the collective and actions which might follow; sometimes, though not always or necessarily, they lead to decisions. But it also indicates that meetings are inevitably concerned with the organizational correlate of Goffman's 'definition of the situation', that is with negotiating and demonstrating the status and authority of participants and the relations between them (Schwartzman 1989, Brown et al 2017). What is at issue in the meeting is not only what might be done in response to declining pupil numbers at a local school, or to an increase in demand for a recreational facility, but the strength of one party group in relation to others, and the authority and legitimacy of the councillor's judgment vis-a-vis the technical advice of the officer.

paperwork

Meetings require, entail and generate paperwork of various kinds: agendas and minutes, plans, proposals, briefings and reports.

I spent the afternoon and part of the evening preparing for a range of meetings that I was to attend/chair this week... I have before me over 1000 pages of reports all of which relate to meetings this week or immediately thereafter [Councillor 1; 24 August]

Meeting with officers to prepare for Cabinet meeting, re papers within my portfolio [Councillor 5; 18 August]

As secretary of the group I spend time preparing minutes and agendas and ensuring the meeting runs smoothly. In addition there are often actions required as a result of the meeting for example arranging to meet Trades Unions or progress the group communications strategy [Councillor 2; 18 August]

An important policy paper… was agreed at Cabinet. This was a significant matter for my portfolio, and the future of the services for which I'm responsible. The paper was agreed after a long discussion among colleagues… [Councillor 5; 20 August]

I spent some time authoring and amending a note of a meeting which I had with an opposition Councillor who chairs the Council's Scrutiny Committee [Councillor 1; 20 August]

In discussion, councillors clearly resented the volume of paperwork they were faced with, though not - at least never so explicitly - the number of meetings they attended. The meeting is where the action is. But if that's the case, why so much paper? What work is it doing?

Politics is a word-based medium. Many of those words are spoken directly between people, or indirectly in different media, but many are written down, committed to paper. We must remember the materiality of meeting: that it consists in interaction not merely between people, but between people and things. The principal 'thing' of government, its paradigmatic artefact, is the document, the written text, form or report (Freeman and Maybin 2011); for Weber, in a similar way, it was the file. For meetings are realised at all only by the circulation and interrelationship of texts and documents, such as advertisements, invitations, emails, abstracts, timetables, briefing and discussion papers, flipcharts, minutes and press releases. Meetings are produced through texts, and they draw on other texts, some of which stand for other meetings. They are both generated by texts and generate new ones. These texts make sense in relation to each other, which is to say that they make sense *of* each other (Freeman 2006).

Even at the most mundane level, 'concrete human action, know-how embodied in practice, persists and is transmitted only if it becomes symbolic. To preserve its form, one must change its form – and then reconstitute it' (Weick 1995, p 125). Minutes of meetings, plans, statements, agreements and press releases are all 'symbolic encodings' which enable actions to be reproduced in time. What this implies is that a key purpose of the document is not to fix meaning, but to make continuing definition and redefinition of the situation possible, to reproduce and extend the interactions it promotes. Similarly, the purpose of those interactions is to reproduce the text; not to replicate or copy it but to help it live on through adaptation and interpretation (Freeman 2008). In this way, the document serves as 'immutable mobile' (Latour 1987), stabilizing meaning in a fixed form while also making it reproducible and available to other readers in other contexts, at other times, in other

places, linking one meeting to the next. It does the work of articulation (Freeman 2006), which is partly why so much work is invested in documents, and why they in turn require so much work.[5]

Documents appear in our data not merely as instruments of council and committee activity, but also their objects, or endpoints. They are things the work of the committee is organized around and toward. The report represents all the ephemera of information-gathering, interpretation and recommendation - all the hidden work of research and writing, all the subtleties of interaction in groups - in physical form. Documents become entities in themselves, quasi-participants in meetings, with attributed status, purposes and effects. They can seem alienating and intimidating, but they are also nurtured and cared for as they move through the world. Paperwork *matters.*

meeting about meeting

One of the striking features of our data was the number of meetings which had as their object the planning and conduct of other meetings. This was a conspicuous feature of meetings both in party groups and in councils.

> *In the evening I attend the fortnightly [party] political group meeting which discusses issues of importance to the group and the administration [Councillor 2; 18 August]*

> *Pre-meeting of key members in advance of party branch meeting [Councillor 5; 18 August]*

[5] In this way, the council in action (Richards and Kuper 1971) is perhaps something like science in action (Latour 1987).

This [party group meeting] is where the more significant reports are brought forward by officers from all departments so the whole group can have an input prior to the respective Convener's meeting. A number of private reports were discussed and amended by [the] group. It also gives the group leadership the opportunity to update the rest of the group on issues and provides an opportunity for any member to raise any issue relating to the group or their role [Councillor 4; 2 September]

Left home at 0800 for 0830 meeting with the Head of Service in final preparation for my taking the chair of the Council Communities Committee [Councillor 1; 18 August]

Meeting with the Director of Environment Department... The meeting was to primarily discuss the agenda for my Convener's meeting at 10am. We spoke about the three items on the forthcoming Environment Committee and I requested an update on a number of issues the department has been working on [Councillor 4; 2 September]

I had a meeting with a Council administrator on a forthcoming meeting of [] which is being hosted by my authority... [Councillor 1; 2 September

As I serve as Depute Convener of the Valuation Board, I have to attend a pre meeting every month prior to the full Board meeting to be briefed on the agenda and any other issues. These pre meetings are extremely important and enable me to carry out my role as Depute Convener more effectively [[Councillor 2; 18 August]

There are two readings of what our participants referred to as 'pre-meetings', one instrumental and one more functional. The first seems characteristic of party political activity and the second of council-based administrative work, though either might hold, in principle, in either setting.

A party caucus meets to discuss how it might 'play' a forthcoming meeting of full council, planning the ways it might steer council business one way rather than other. It identifies positions and voting intentions; it rehearses arguments raised against those positions by other councillors and party groups, and how it might respond. Uncertainty and disagreement, which would be sources of embarrassment if revealed in public, are confined safely to the backstage. This is instrumental and manipulative, and based in sectional interest, but it would be politically and perhaps professionally inept not to engage it. Seen in this light, the work of the pre-meeting is to keep the politics out of the meeting itself, which remains the ostensible – yet now no more than ostensible - locus of deliberation and decision-making. It is to avoid conflict, or more precisely to generate and organize specific forms of conflict; it is to (try to) control the definition of the situation the meeting itself might make. Something of what's going on is captured in one of our discussant's remarks that the council meeting is 'a meeting held in public' rather than 'a public meeting'. It is vivid in Spencer's classic account of Aberton:

> *'(O)n the evening preceding the council meeting, the groups of both parties separately considered the formal agenda and decided on their tactics. Neither knew precisely what the other intended to do, but they had faced one another often enough to make certain shrewd guesses... [In the council meeting] the behaviour of the council members... varied from utter silence to uproar, from joking to exaggerated allegation, and from rapt attention to irrelevant interjections: all these were reactions to the public nature of the occasion' (Spencer 1971, p 187, p 189).*

The council meeting, that is to say, has become an occasion for the performance of a decision, rather than the effective forum or occasion for formulating, debating or taking it. 'Everything is done and dusted before the meeting', as one of our participants said.

Yet what our councillors say also suggests that, certainly in their professional dealings with officers and others, they are as much concerned with 'getting it right' as with 'gaining control'. This is what many of their consultations seem to be about. Some of their concern is with form and process, with the normal and normative workings of the institution - for the work of a committee is valid only if it is seen to be properly constituted and conducted - but it is also a concern with understanding the substantive items on an agenda, and there is a case for thinking of it as functional rather than instrumental.

An issue addressed in a meeting of full council will have been considered previously and less formally by working groups and sub-committees, as well as by parties, and may indeed have reached them only as a result of preliminary discussions and wholly informal consultations and encounters. That is to say that is the culmination of a sequence or process of meetings of different kinds, and these different kinds of meeting do different kinds of work.[6]

The full meetings of a council are full in the sense that all members are present but also in that they are fully documented, and it is this documented aspect that gives them a public, legal status. They are formal not least because they speak to a public beyond the meeting itself, and so must be seen to be authoritative, consensual and effective. Full meetings are where those qualities are demonstrated; they are where the authority of the council is performed, and there must be no risk of this performance (and therefore authority) breaking down. So full meetings carry a ceremonial function: they are where decisions are announced and promulgated, not where they are formulated and made. It is in informal meetings backstage – in undocumented exchanges - that members engage in the uncertain process of negotiation with each other: it is there that ideas might be put forward and discussed without risk of public embarrassment should they be rejected. It is where

[6] I am indebted to Nicolas Lamp's (2017) study of the WTO for insights in this paragraph and the next.

papers may be worked on and revised, before they acquire the inviolate status accorded by approval and acceptance at a formal meeting.

articulating institutions

What does the work of meeting tell us about the role of the councillor? We might begin by reflecting on the reason for meeting at all. The political theorist who did most to ground her thinking in a concept of human interaction is Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958). For Arendt, politics begins in plurality, 'the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world… While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition... of all political life' (Arendt 1958, pp 9-10).[7] Action, and specifically political action, is always interaction, a function of this plurality: action is simply what 'goes on directly between men' (p 9).

This is a claim not just about the way the world is, but also about how we know and understand the world. Plurality is not only what is there, what is real, but the means by which we know what is real: 'To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all' (p 178). We constantly calibrate what we think we know against what others seem to know. '(W)ithout trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt' (p 187). In our study, for example, the encounter is where the constituent tests a sense of a problem with her councillor, where it is defined and redefined, validated or otherwise, and the meeting is where councillors debate with officers and each other what the problem is and what might be done

[7] Page references are from the paperback edition (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

about it; it is in the encounter and in meeting that each participant forms an understanding of the identities and capacities of others.

Arendt's work was necessarily abstract, as she sought to recover some of the precepts of classical political thought. In practice and over time, we should expect to find the practice of 'plurality' institutionalised in different ways (van Vree 1999, 2011), which meets indeed with our finding that the institution of meeting is not one but several, loosely coupled. They have been categorised here as the encounter, the meeting, the document and the 'meeting about meeting', and like any such heuristic, this one will be subject to revision in further research. The essential point remains that the varieties of meeting seem self-evidently an expression of Arendt's notion of plurality, or more specifically of an institutionalised response to her problem of plurality, that is of living together in communities in the world.

Lowndes and Roberts (2013) consolidate a wide range of contemporary theorising about institutions in political life into accounts of rules, practices and narratives, and each is evident in the studies of meeting presented here. Just as the encounter is marked and shaped by social convention, so the meeting is organized according to formal rules of procedure, while the pre-meeting seems established as standard practice. The work of each is to generate and sustain a narrative, both about the world and about its own status and functioning. The apparent ubiquity of the meeting makes it the more remarkable that it should have received such little attention in institutionalist political science.

It is important to note that kinds of meeting are not specific to kinds of world. The work of the council officer is predicated on the informal encounter as much as on the formal meeting. Because it is characteristic of the formal meeting that it should have formal membership, the ordinary constituent's access to it is as observer rather than participant; for the most part, his or her political

engagement will consist in attending public gatherings and in more circumscribed, mostly one-to-one encounters with an elected representative. What is notable, however, is the extent to which the councillor, perhaps uniquely, has a legitimate presence in each of the different kinds of meeting in each political world.

In this way, this paper has sought to understand the work of meeting and why it should be such a prominent, if not defining feature of being a councillor. And what it says about the role of the councillor follows directly from that: quite simply, the councillor is a meetings specialist. Behind and beneath the role typologies of the contemporary literature, the work of the councillor is to engage directly with others in a range of contexts, and in a volume and variety peculiar to her role. The skills she requires are those needed to manage in meetings: interpersonal qualities of patience and tact, political skills of argument and persuasion and administrative-technical skills of reading, writing and calculation, any or all of which might be required from one moment to the next in any given encounter.

To the extent that different kinds of meeting do different kinds of work, the role of the councillor is to articulate or translate between them (Strauss 1988, Freeman 2009). But what might that mean, both theoretically and in practice? How might we think of this work of articulation? How is one meeting made present in another? There are two concepts which might help understand how, that of bracketing and of intertextuality, and both warrant further empirical investigation. The concept of *bracketing* is derived from phenomenology of Husserl, and is used in ethnomethodology to refer to a heuristic suspending of the research object from the external world. By bracketing it we separate the object from the world to which it belongs in order to understand it 'in itself', 'on its own terms'. The concept has three possible applications in understanding the meeting, and the first is simply this ethnomethodological usage: that we treat the meeting in and of itself, trying to separate what is actually going on from what is assumed to be going on. The second is to recognise that the

meeting itself brackets time and space (Thunus nd). Though it may be held in the workplace, it will usually be somewhere other than where work is done, often in a dedicated meeting space. It interrupts the temporal process of other work tasks: we break off from what would otherwise be doing in order to go to a meeting. A third use of bracketing is grammatical, expressed in the parenthesis. The parenthesis breaks up the sentence and is logically separate to it, but in an equal and opposite way performs an explanatory, informative or illustrative function. The meeting is inserted into the work process as brackets are into a sentence, supporting, amplifying or qualifying its meaning.

A second concept of *intertextuality* seeks to capture the way the meaning of one text depends on its relationship to others, and how texts relate to others in order to create meaning (Allen 2000). Its utility here lies in identifying how one meeting is made present in another; how meetings refer back to previous meetings and how they imagine parallel and future ones taking place elsewhere. It prompts us to ask how connections between meetings are made by meeting participants in interaction with each other, that is with how they construct and link previously separated actors, events and meetings.

For Arendt, interests are 'worldly', which means they lie 'between people and can therefore relate and bind them together. Most action and speech are concerned with this in-between' (p 162). Because of the uncertainties of action and the way it is revealed and interpreted, 'the physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origins exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another' (pp 162-3). This is politics, as it emerges in her treatment of 'action', and here I have wanted to show how it is constituted in meeting. For the meeting takes place in Arendt's 'in-between'; the meeting separates and connects. In understanding the work it does, and with it the role of the councillor, we want to know how it cuts itself off and

becomes a world of its own, and then how it constructs and connects to the world outside. For meeting is a world-making activity.

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